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The Critical Study of the Dichotomous Representation of the Natives as the Other in Hedayat's *Blind Owl*

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Abstract: Despite the voluminous amount of research on the *Blind Owl*, little is still carried out on the representation of the natives in this work. This paper explores the text to reveal how the author, by giving credit to himself as an 'I', artist and a painter, tries to establish a division between himself and the rest of the society, the world of *Rajalehah*, the Rabble. Through the employment of the new genre of writing, the novel, Hedayat not only revolts against all the forms of traditional writings but also all the traditional customs and at large makes use of it as a means of scattering his ideological concepts through the mouth of the narrator. This discussion seeks to unveil the mask of orientalist system of representation of the natives, as the peripheral, and finally the 'Other'.

Keywords: representation, *rajalehah*, Lakateh, unhomeliness, 'Other'.

Blind Owl and its Themes

This novelette has many themes. It encompasses uncertainty pertaining to the metaphysic, self-denigration, desire and disavowal, identity dilemma, binary opposition, in-between status, stereotypical representation of the natives and finally nationalism. I will concentrate on them vis-à-vis the content of the text. *Blind Owl* is a non-linear story, it has no closure, and it is dark as well as bleak, filled with chaos. It begins from a very old times and proceeds to the present, but it lacks a logical temporal arrangement (Etehad 2009: 82). The story begins with a statement depicting the narrator's ontological and even one might find suitable to say epistemological view. The narration is non-linear as it jumps from the present to the past and vice versa. Past and present are sometimes fused together that if we are not careful, the details can be confusing. It is encased between two different eras, the past and the present. The story starts by asserting that "there are certain sores that, like a canker, gnaws at the soul in solitude and diminish it (Hedayat 1984: 1). And he continues that he might pass away but still not know himself. From the very beginning he establishes a division between himself and the rest of his own society, using the pronoun 'I' he gives himself a privilege status in comparison to the 'other'. He says "I have realized that a frightful chasm lies between the others and me" (Hedayat 1984: 2).

Another significant feature of the story is that it is bleak and filled with chaos. Iran is shown as a country that is ugly and backward. It is filled with people who are either superstitious, deteriorated by Islamic tradition for which the 'I' gives no care at all and a bunch of useless, shameless, diabolical rude, beggarish mule-drivers who lack insight and wisdom (Hedayat 1984: 45)

Plot summary

The narrator, a pen-case decorator, falls in love with a girl who is at once angelic and devilish. Later, the girl appears by his doorstep, enters his house, and lies on his bed, where he gives her some sips of poisonous wine and kills her. He dismembers her body and buries her. In the second part of the story, after smoking a lot of opium, the narrator wakes up in a world which is very close to his real world and he recounts his mental and physical decline following his marriage to a woman who refuses to have sex with him but has countless lovers. He kills her.

Binary Opposition

The story is built on the basis of binary opposition. Good in the opposite of bad, Islamic society in the opposite of European society, Platonic or better to say pure unpolluted Sassanid love against contemporary, Islamicised love, Ethereal girl in the opposite of *Lakateh*, The narrator against the *Rajaleha*, old Rey representing Iranian historical glorious era in the opposite of post-Islamicised or the contemporary time, to mention just a few. According to Ashcroft (2004: 23) “binarism comes from ‘binary’, meaning a combination of two things, a pair, ‘two’, duality (*OED*)... The binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible... Such oppositions, each of which represents a binary system, are very common in the cultural construction of reality.”

binarism comes from ‘binary’, meaning a combination of two things, a pair, ‘two’, duality (*OED*), this is a widely used term with distinctive meanings in several fields and one that has had particular sets of meanings in post-colonial theory. The binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible – sun/moon; man/woman; birth/death; black/white. Such oppositions, each of which represents a binary system, are very common in the cultural construction of reality Ashcroft (2004: 23).

Binary oppositions are structurally connected with one another, and in colonial discourse there may be a degree of diversity of the one underlying binary – colonizer/colonized – that becomes reemphasised and re-expressed in any particular text in many different ways (Ashcroft and et al 2004: 23). The binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible through which the system of the cultural construction of reality works. Through binary oppositions as the basic dichotomies which advocated in the West, what Western thought is generally concerned is to see the world in terms of the Westerners against non-European Origins, the aliens. This binary system establishes a relation of dominance and justifies “the hierarchical cultural and radical assumptions of European thought” (Royle 2000: 190). The binary system plays a very significant role in “the constructing ideological meanings in general and extremely useful in imperial ideology” (Ashcroft and et al 2004: 23-25).

Narrator and *Rajalehah* Dichotomy

Blind Owl is the author’s manifesto in which he unquestionably attacks his private and social environment. Hedayat in this treatise of hopelessness clarifies his political and social position from the very beginning. In the *Blind Owl*, the narrator finds himself in a horrible way decomposing, identifies that he is alive, a living being who has a dreadful life. Such an individual who has a half European characteristic and half native features, in other words composed two contradictory derives (Mirabedini 2002: 791) is looking for a truth which he has been acquainted with in Europe, so when he comes to native homeland he feels that “everything related to the life-style and the joys of others nauseated him” (Hedayat 1984: 37). This sense of anger will cause to establish a lid wall between himself and others. He realises that “a frightful chasm lies between others and him” (Hedayat 1984: 2). He finds himself lonely and everyday this isolation becomes stronger. When he reaches where it is supposed to be the secure space of his self-realization, he faces a bunch of what he calls superstitious gossip and whores and he transcribes all these observations onto the paper and he realises that that there is no more any place for the poetry and his feelings and thoughts are not transmittable. At this time he depicts himself as the self who is enchained in such a trashcan full of worms and dirt that he has no choice but to escape, but there is no loophole. The *Rajaleha*, the rabble have occupied everywhere, they build chains with their polluted hands and place them before the feet of such a rare person (Ethad 2009: 186). This is the mode that the modern education and upbringing induced in many of our generation, especially in those who had been fascinated by the Western literature, thoughts and customs, and “Sadegh Hedayat was one of them” (Safa 2003: 187, qtd in Ethad).

The Representation of the Natives as the Other

The narrator reveals society as distastefully sluggish and inactive filled with people who do not resemble him in thoughts and manners. Thus in order to define and give meaning to himself as an ‘I’, he creates a discourse mostly oriented from his ideological and Westernly educational standpoint. As an avant-garde artist who was supposed to push the boundaries of what is accepted as the status quo, traditional literature, religion and traditions of people, Hedayat draws a line from the onset between himself and those who are different from him in thoughts and behaviours.

This Oriental discourse puts face and a mould to the Oriental character [the natives, *rajaleha*, the rabble, the *Lakateh*, the whore, and all the others]. Ideas about it influence the idea of the West and the other. In many ways this notion of the superior West and the inferior East is solidified because the difference between them is intensified by the Orientalist discourse (Said 1978: 42). Discourse is governed by the ruling power; the ruling power determines what is to be narrated and how to narrate an event. In the case of the *Blind Owl*, the narrator of the story appropriates this authority to represent the natives the way he likes. Said (1978: 20) argues that an Orientalist writer must first of

all locate himself or herself vis-à-vis the Orient. This will later on affect his/her interpretation of the Orient. the tools that she/he uses: voice, structure, images, themes and motifs will direct the writer's approach towards his/her readers, give him/her authority to represent and speak on the Orient's behalf and as well as providing means to govern the Orient. All this does not occur in the vacuum because according to Said (1978: 20) all writers assume some Oriental precedent and previous knowledge of the Orient that he/she refers to and relies on.

One of the famous themes in the Hedayat's works is the description and the judgments that he extends to the people whom he names *rajaleha*, the rabbles. By the word *rajaleha*, he does not mean hooligans, thugs and hoodlum in its ordinary sense, but all the people who in most cases do not believe in the values that they pretend to have been attached. In order to gain success in the life they will not avoid any activities including begging, embezzlement, lying, vulgarity, deception, fashion follower or to be an opportunist. In the *Dark House* (1995), the isolated person tells the narrator "Only a bunch of thieves, shameless fools and sick people are allowed to live in this environment. Those unfit for thieving or baseness and those not given to flattery are pronounced 'unfit for living!'" (Hedayat 1995: 40). In the story of *Deadend* (1942), the protagonist has fallen behind of his cheeky and thief colleagues because of his honesty and sincerity. When he returns his hometown from Tehran, everything looks to him narrow, limited, ordinary and low and "his work pals had pushed their grip further into the abdomen of life...some of them more or less had reached their limited aspirations: their belly had been grown bigger and their sexual passions had been transmitted from their waist down to their jaws, or in the distresses of life, they had focused on the swindling, plundering of their peasantry, cotton, opium and wheat products or their children's dippers and their old gout" (Hedayat 1942: 42-43).

In another story named *Gojaste Abālish* (1940) which is according to Homa Katouzian (1993: 54) belongs to Hedayat's Psycho-fiction stories- we read that "you mean these people?...what controls them is firstly the belly and secondly their sexual passion, with a bundle of anger and bundle of must and must not which are blindly infiltrated into their ears" (Hedayat 1932: 249). And in the *Three Bloods* (1932), we witness some traces of the *rajaleha*, the rabbles, in the male cat. When in the spring season, *Nazi-Siyavash's* female cat- emitted sorrowful moan of love: "Male cats from all around the neighbourhood heard Nazi's moans and came to meet her. After much struggle and many cat fights, eventually, *Nazi* chose the strongest and the most boisterous of the suitors to be her mate. Of prime importance in love making is the animals' special scent. That is why males that are tame and clean do not move their females. While alley cats, cats on the prowl, thieving cats, emaciated cats, stray cats, and famished cats; in general those cats whose hides have retained their primordial scent, attract the females most" (Hedayat 2000: 5).

But in the *Blind Owl*, the description and making judgments on the *rajaleha* is more detailed, much bitter, much clearer and much harsher than any other Hedayat's works. The point that Hedayat does not mean the hooligans, thugs and hoodlum in the street by the word *rajaleha* is more observable in the novelette. Among these *rajaleha*, who are from every profession and social groups; a trip-peddler, a jurist, a liver-peddler, the chief magistrate, a judge, a trader and a philosopher are some who have relationship with the *Lakateh*, the whore, the narrator's wife. In one stage, the narrator tries to learn their manners and ethics with the hope to attract the whore, but he says "How could I learn the ways of the rabble anyway? But now I know that she loved them because they were shameless, smelly fools" (Hedayat 1984: 29). He says that not only is he not afraid of the death but also longs for it, but "I was afraid, however, that the particles of my body might blend with those of the rabbles, an idea which I could not bear" (Hedayat 1984: 45). He earnestly wished to die but he was frightened that such a thing happens to him: "Sometimes I wished that I had long hands and long sensitive fingers so that I could gather the particles of my body carefully and prevent them from getting mixed with those of the rabbles" (Hedayat 1984: 45). The narrator describes these people this way when he talks about what he did to disappear and lose himself and escapes from all these miseries and affliction that enmeshed him:

I passed through many streets and distraughtly walked by the rabble who, with greedy faces, were in pursuit of money and last. In fact, I did not need to see them to know them; one was enough to represent the rest. They were all like one big mouth leading to a wad of guts, terminating in a sexual organ (Hedayat 1984: 33).

One of the things that like a canker gnaw at the soul of the narrator in solitude and diminish it is this incurable disease. It is because of this disease that he has to be abject, worthless, deprived and isolated and those, the *rajaleha*, because of their shamelessness and haughtiness and their ability to wear different masks to enjoy all the blessings:

I had a feeling that this world was not made for me but for a group of pseudo- intellectuals: a group of shameless, diabolical, rude, beggarish mule-drivers who lack insight and wisdom. It was made for those who were created to suit it, those who, like the hungry dog in front of the butcher shop wagging its tail for a bit of offal, are used to flatter the mighty of the earth and of the sky (Hedayat 1984: 45).

And almost the same feelings and ideas will be uttered somewhere else in the story:

But for some reason everything related to the life-style and the joys of others nauseated me. What relationship could exist between the lives of the fools and healthy rabble who were well, who slept well, who performed the sexual act well, who had never felt the wings of death on their face every moment--what relationship could exist between them and one like me who has arrived at the end of his rope and who knows that he will pass away gradually and tragically (Hedayat 1984: 37).

According to Natel Khanlari (2002: 235) Hedayat belonged to a passive and immobilized social class which were condemned to surrender before the movement of the lower social classes or to change its manners and method. This social class had come to the end of its evolvement procedure because of superfluous comfort and was deteriorating. For this reason all the characteristics of a demolishing generation was materialised in Hedayat. He obviously witnessed the cancellation of the titles of Qajar period and the old families were condemned to discolouring and deforming in the newly raised social classes and since Hedayat was not able to face this compulsory evolvement, he was involved in a type of timidity and shyness and passivity. He was suspicious to anyone from the low social classes who was working hard to heighten his/her social position and was taking them as the usurpers of the social positions. He hated all those who worked hard to achieve a better life and he used a particular idiom to refer to them. He used to call the Rajaleh, the rabbles.

This feeling toward his countrymen pushes him toward the verge of losing mental equilibrium. His mental imbalance depicts him as an unusual figure among his native people and excludes him, making him to seem an outsider, merely because he suggests foreign ideas resulted from his half European moods (Fardid 2003: 627). Sadegh Hedayat apparently because of his fascination toward the western historical traditions had raised his arm against the oriental traditions but he never succeeded to free himself from the grip of oriental family. Thus there was always a binary opposition lived in him (Fardid 2003: 627-628). In this sense, he is very much like the Orientalist, who judges the East from the West's viewpoint wherein there is a lack of traditional reform in the Orient. Therefore, the East seems to be, in reference to the aforementioned worthy/unworthy duality, unworthy, according to the narrator. He acts as though he were a member of the colonial class and, yet, his suffering, which results, in part, from his never-ending contemplation of two polar opposites -- the existence or non-existence of metaphysics or the ethereal girl representing the pre-Islamic and glorious time of Sassanid era and the present, post-Islamised conditions embodied in the configuration of his wife, or even tradition represented in the people he names *rajaleh*, religion and modernity-- parallels the suffering of the post-colonial subject who has been exposed to another set of binary opposites: Eastern thought, and its antithesis; Western thought. The narrator cannot find source of comfort in either culture.

Conclusion

Said (1978: 7) argues European culture is hegemonic and regarded as superior to non-European people and cultures, because Orientalism has imparted the idea of a superior European identity to the world. The "east" or "Orient" being the entity of the Islamic countries which are viewed as "inferior" by, and to, the Western counterparts, has expressed, in many ways as the beginning and spreading of post-colonial sentiments relating to this very Western domination. Mashallah Ajoudani (2003: 115-126) claims that intelligentsia influenced by the Western European view of the world as perhaps the only correct one rather than one possibility among many. This Intelligentsia including Hedayat found themselves developing a sense of dislocating their feeling of place from Iran to Western countries. This confused sense of identity contributes to an emotional and at large conceptual distance between the mimic man and the others and this led him to reject the cultural traditions of his people and with them, any comfort of traditional religious teachings.

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